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Breaking with tradition

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BREAKING WITH TRADITION

WHY TAKING A GAP YEAR CAN BE A GOOD THING

BY ELIZABETH JACAVINO DESIGN ALIXANDRIA COLLINS PHOTOGRAPHY SAM GREENE

Being burnt out is a feeling every student has experienced. Sometimes work, school and play are too suffocating and make us want a break from it all, but taking time off from school is not something a majority of students do. It can seem drastic, but some students find that a break is exactly what they needed to be successful.

Students take breaks for many different reasons. Some students feel lost about what they want to do, some don't think they're mature enough to go to college yet and others work to be able to afford school.

FINDING YOURSELF

For Sephora Thompson, a first-year student at Iowa State, a college career started a year later than her peers. Instead of heading off to a university after graduation, she embarked on a year-long exchange trip to Rome.

"[I thought] there will never be any other time in [my] life where I'll have a year where I don't have to work, I don't have to go to school. I can just focus on seeing the world, meeting new people, learning a language," says Thompson.

While Thompson was abroad, she traveled around Italy to different cities and regions. She went to Venice, Florence, Assisi, Sardinia, Bologna and Naples. At the end of her program, Thompson and her friend decided to go on a cruise where they went to Barcelona, Paris and Mykonos, Greece.

Cora Weatherford, a sophomore at Iowa State, also felt like the gap between high school and college was the best time to experience the world.

"School goes on for so long," says Weatherford. "I wanted a break."

Weatherford knew she didn't want to go to college right after high school. She had gone on a trip to Europe through her high school the summer before her sophomore year. After that trip she knew she wanted to travel and become more cultured before going to a university. She spent the next 10 months in Adelaide, Australia, where she lived with host families and attended high school for the cultural experience. It was over in Adelaide, that Weatherford discovered what she wanted to study at university.

"I went over [to Australia] totally confused about what I wanted to do," says Weatherford.

Her second host family was involved in the political atmosphere. It was through them that she discovered her interest in politics. She is now studying political science and plans on attending law school.

While Weatherford was able to use her time off from school to discover what she wanted to do with her life, Ellen Colville didn't take time off between high school and college, pursuing higher education without knowing what she wanted to study — she says people just told her she'd figure it out while in school.

"I came into college undecided," says Colville, "[I thought] I wanted to do something with chemistry because I really loved chemistry in high school. And I got here, and I think what happened was I didn't try hard enough to get better grades or enjoy my classes. So, I changed my major to business... and then I decided event management." However, event management still wasn't a fit for Colville. She was now a junior in college, and still undecided about what she wanted to do. A week into the spring semester of 2015 she felt lost about what she wanted to do. "I

was unhappy and I didn't know what major I wanted to do," says Colville. After a talk with her parents, she decided to take the semester off and moved home to Colfax, Iowa.

"It gave me the time to really think about what I wanted to do" says Colville.

Colville is now a public relations major. She hopes to one day be a PR rep for a national park.

For Christine Hopkins, it took a degree in psychology from the University of Iowa and two breaks from school to figure out what she wanted to do. Hopkins, a 26-year-old senior in journalism at Iowa State, first took a year off when she felt unsure about her path at the University of Iowa.

"I was disorganized," says Hopkins. "I didn't know what I wanted to do for grad school... I didn't know if I wanted to stay in psychology."

During her initial time off, Hopkins worked at an auditor's office for the presidential election in 2012.

"And then I found out from my friend that the site Mic.com was taking on new people. So I emailed them and was like 'Hey. Are you still taking on new people?' and I got my first assignment."

Hopkins wrote three to four articles a day from her home in Knoxville, Iowa.

"With Mic I kind of found that it was easy to kind of commit myself to that kind of work and I got to talk to some cool people remote. It was a good learning experience both world-wise and journalism-wise.

In August of 2013, Hopkins began graduate school. She was in her program for health education until halfway through the fall of 2014 when she withdrew.

"I took a couple months off, regrouped and applied [at Iowa State]," says Hopkins. She began her undergraduate degree for journalism in fall of 2015.

MONEY MONEY MONEY

Taking time off isn't just about leisure activities and mental health. It also comes down to finances. Thompson went to Rome for less than one year's tuition, and Weatherford didn't want to spend thousands of dollars when she didn't know what she wanted to be.

"In high school it is so different because it is cheaper and it is good to experience before you go to [college]" says Weatherford, "I had no obligations those 10 months [in Australia.]"

Brittany Trow has been able to pay down her loans by working two jobs. Colville worked 40 hours a week at her town's pizza shop. But the Director of Admissions at Iowa State University, Katharine Suski, says she is wary of students taking time off to work.

"Those are the students that, in my experience, don't come back to school," says Suski. "That makes me think that the student isn't focused on school."

Throughout her 18 years of working in admissions, Suski says the students who take time off between high school and college to work are the ones she worries most about — although military students, those on mission trips and those that have a plan are students that Suski is confident will come to college and finish a degree.

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WILL YOU EVER GO BACK?

When students first mention taking time off, eventually someone will say that if you take time off of school, then you'll never go back. The stigma behind taking time off has deterred students. Colville was one of those students that was afraid to take time off because of judgement from her peers, but her father convinced her that the break would be worth it, encouraging her to go ahead and take the semester off. Thompson's father was also extremely supportive in her decision to go to Rome for a year. Her grandparents weren't as much. They didn't think Thompson would go to college if she didn't attend right after high school, but she knew better.

"I knew that taking a year off wasn't going to stop me from going to college," says Thompson. Colville also never had doubts. "I never felt like I wouldn't come back" says Colville.

Weatherford's parents were apprehensive when she first mentioned taking a year off of school. "[My parents] had this idea that if I didn't go to school right away I wouldn't want to," says Weatherford, "but once they saw how much I matured, they were happy I did."

"I never felt like I wouldn't come back" says Colville.

MORE POSITIVES THAN NEGATIVES

Not following the usual pathway to school can be scary and stressful. Standing alone in a new country or returning home to organize and establish your next major life move can be intimidating. The risk of taking the path less traveled can output major rewards.

"One of the best things [about my year off] is building my confidence in the professional world," says Trow. Through her two jobs in hospitals, Trow has worked alongside doctors, nurse practitioners, nurses and other physician assistants. "I've been able to network this year... I've gotten letters of recommendation from the people I work with."

Hopkins was also able to network through her work at Mic. She is still in touch with multiple people that she worked while she took time off. Weatherford and Thompson experienced not only a year abroad, but also a year where they were able to mature and grow as adults.

"I learned how to live and be with people who were completely different than [me]" says Weatherford. "I really matured."

Thompson feels the same way. "I learned a lot about myself and what I was capable of," she says. "I'm still not over it." Though these students have taken a path less traveled, they feel like their time away from school was beneficial.

"I have never met anyone who has regretted taking time off," says Thompson.